EDITORIAL

Blackbirds, Scare Tactics, and Irresponsible Legislation

A friend of mine once commented that there are only 2 ways that a legislator can responsibly vote on legislation: (1) he can vote according to the expressed wishes of his constituency, or (2) he can vote following his own convictions after having thoroughly studied the pros and cons of a particular bill. On 27 January 1976 a bill was introduced into both houses of Congress that would allow Kentucky and Tennessee to bypass environmental laws so that they might eliminate millions of blackbirds by spraying them on their roosts with the pesticide Tergitol. The bill was passed by the Senate and House on the day it was introduced and was quickly signed into law by President Ford. Since there was no opportunity for citizens to express their feelings to their legislators and since the bill was passed without legislators having an opportunity to study both sides of the issue, I can only conclude that a majority of our legislators voted irresponsibly.

Environmental groups have expressed serious concern over the passage of this bill because it allows a special interest group to circumvent the National Environmental Policy Act and other federal laws. A dangerous precedent has been set. Recognizing the seriousness of these broader implications of the blackbird bill, I would like to comment on the specific problem which precipitated this legislation.

Few people would want a blackbird roost in their back yard or perhaps even within a kilometer of their residence. Blackbird roosts smell, an accumulation of excrement may kill vegetation in the roost, there may be a health hazard due to the growth of the fungus *Histoplasma capsulatum* in the nitrogen-rich soil beneath the roost, and some blackbird species feed on agricultural crops. The first two negative effects of a blackbird roost are obvious, but do not have dangerous or enduring consequences. The second 2 effects are controversial, but are continually recited in the popular press and on radio and television in attempts to gain support for blackbird "eradication" programs. We hear a lot about the dangers of histoplasmosis associated with blackbird roosts, but no one has quantified this danger nor has the relative importance of blackbird roosts as reservoirs for the fungus been examined. Unfortunately most of the literature concerning histoplasmosis is in medical journals, though I have elsewhere summarized and interpreted some of this literature as it relates to birds (Jackson, Inland Bird Banding News 45:52–57, 1973). The spores of *Histoplasma* are dispersed from the soil by the wind and the fungus grows not only in blackbird roosts, but anywhere there is a high concentration of nitrogen in the soil. Poultry farms are important natural reservoirs for the fungus. They tend to be much more permanent than blackbird roosts and the ground is often bare, thus increasing the likelihood of growth of the fungus and dispersal of the spores. Cattle feedlots would also seem to be optimum areas for growth and dispersal of *Histoplasma*, though I know of no studies that document this. In short, I suspect that the seasonal, frequently moved blackbird roosts present much less of a hazard than do other situations which we have readily accepted. Why aren't the potential hazards of poultry farms and the like subject to as much public attention? Perhaps it is a matter of economics—we are willing to tolerate the danger of histoplasmosis if it means dollars in the pocket. On the other hand, perhaps it is because the disease-causing fungus is ubiquitous and the elimination of individual reservoirs of the fungus is meaningless in terms of the general presence of the spores in the air. The real answer may be somewhere in between. It is of interest that skin tests indicate that up to 90% of adults in the states where the disease is most common have been exposed to the pathogen (Ajello, *in* Histoplasmosis, p. 88–98, Charles C. Thomas, Publisher, Springfield, Ill., 1960; Negroni, Histoplasmosis, diagnosis and

treatment, Charles C. Thomas, Publisher, Springfield, Ill., 1965), and that in most people the disease is apparently little worse than the common cold.

The second "serious" consequence of blackbird roosts is also generally aired by the news media from only one point of view—the number of dollars worth of grain consumed by the hoards of blackbirds. What weed seed and overwintering insects do blackbirds also eat and what dollar value do we place on the birds' control of these pests? Both sides of the ledger need to be completed before the books can be closed. Furthermore, what will be the long term effects of destroying millions of blackbirds? These birds feed arthropods to their nestlings. If fewer blackbirds return north in spring to nest, might not northern farmers have greater problems with crop pests? And what of the reproductive potential of blackbirds? We know that when other species' populations are reduced they "bounce" right back as a result of increased production and survival of young. We have no reason to suspect that blackbird populations are any different. Blackbird roosts are a part of our environment and they are likely to remain so because of the innate behavior of the birds and the ways in which we manage the land. Attempts to rid ourselves of blackbird roosts will only result in destruction of wildlife, degradation of the environment, the dispersal of some roosts for part of a winter season, and the continual expenditure of large sums of money. If the birds don't return to the same roost the following year, it doesn't mean a problem has been solved; it means only that the problem has gone somewhere else—and perhaps it is even more of a problem there.

Blackbird roosts near human population centers may be bad, but when the birds roost on public land away from human population centers, let's leave them alone. Instead of spending money and energy on anti-blackbird campaigns using scare tactics based on half-truths, let us assemble what knowledge we have of the birds and the problems they supposedly cause, find out what we don't know, then spend our money on research to answer some of the presently many unanswered questions. Perhaps then we will be able to understand and reasonably manage the birds rather than merely destroy them. —Jerome A. Jackson.

(As a sad footnote to this editorial, I have learned that on 27 and 28 January, the Tennessee Department of Agriculture directed the spraying of Fenthion from National Guard helicopters at a blackbird roost at Henry Horton State Park. The kill from this spraying was apparently insignificant and on 9 February a second spraying was done using methyl parathion. The Audubon Council of Tennessee reports that only a few dozen blackbirds were killed, but that Cardinals, Song Sparrows, Mockingbirds, Screech Owls, Red-tailed Hawks, and Marsh Hawks were also found dead.)